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ABSTRACT

This report provides background information on Polish refugees that may be of use to sponsors involved in Polish refugee resettlement in the United States. The report discusses economic and social conditions in Poland; the social values and political attitudes of modern Polish refugees as opposed to those of Poles who settled in the United States much earlier, especially before World War II; possible Polish first impressions of American society; and potential problems of Polish adjustment to American life. It is suggested that differences in Polish and American political and sociocultural patterns will bring about conflicts in Polish concepts of independence versus control, discipline, self-confidence, and saving versus waste, and will require Polish adjustment to new work situations, language, housing conditions, transportation arrangements, social relationships, and food habits. Nevertheless, it is expected that although the Polish refugee in the United States may experience considerable initial shock due to sociocultural differences, he will eventually be able to adjust and become a productive member of American society. (Author/MJL)

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The Polish People

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

BY

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January 1982

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THE POLISH PEOPLE

The Challenge of Sponsorship

I. Conditions in Poland

Though the country's economic conditions are deplorable, Poles, in general, are not poor. They have jobs and earn money. However, people have to buy things when they see them, not when they need them, because the supply of goods and food is erratic. Housing is scarce to a point that often two or more families have to share bathrooms and kitchens, and people frequently have to wait years before an apartment becomes available. Scarcity, however, does not mean that Polish housing is necessarily inferior. On the contrary, Poles, like some other Europeans, attach an extremely high value to neatness and outward appearance of things as well as people. Their rooms are probably more carefully decorated and more elegant than an equivalent American home. A person's wardrobe may be small, but is likely to consist of high quality clothing. Polish women are very resourceful in using the limited supplies available to them to make new and original things, whether it be with clothes, food, or other household items.

People in the towns and cities spend an inordinate amount of time standing in lines for all kinds of goods. Many goods cannot be bought with Polish money at all. The government, in great debt to foreign banks, seeks to maximize its income of foreign currency through a number of ways. In many locations there are so called Dollar-Stores which sell foreign as well as Polish export goods, otherwise unavailable on the local market, to those who can pay with U.S. dollars. Because many people find these stores offensive by servicing a privileged group of people, Solidarity has demanded that these stores be abolished. But U.S. dollars have been a major currency in Poland. Not only do most cars, including the domestic models, have to be paid for in U.S. dollars, but ordinary engine oil and replacement parts can only be obtained at official autopart stores which accept only U.S. dollars. In terms of dollars that people's salaries can buy on the black market, the Polish salaries are very insignificant.

Another avenue for the government to earn foreign exchange has been through encouraging people abroad to send goods or monies to Poland. Through the PKO system, people abroad can send money or select from a catalogue a variety of packages (e.g. wedding, baby, food) they would like to send to relatives and friends in Poland. These goods are Polish, though again usually not available in Poland, and are packed in Poland, but paid for abroad and in dollars. The PKO charged high fees and was slow, taking three to six months, but for a while the system functioned reasonably well. Later its reputation deteriorated considerably with some monies and packages not arriving at all. During the recent crisis and shortages in Poland the PKO

has collapsed entirely. During the last year, prior to the crisis, certain private firms were allowed to provide other, usually more efficient, channels for sending goods to Poland.

Much of the farming population lives as independent farmers. Only three percent work in rural cooperatives. For a while, each farmer had to supply the government with a certain quota of goods, a quota sometimes so high that the farmer had nothing or little left for his own family. The official prices paid for these goods were sometimes lower than the production cost, depriving the farmer of any incentive to produce. During recent years, many of the quotas have been lowered while others were abolished entirely, allowing the farmer to sell his produce on the free market. Since the prices paid by the government have also been fairly good, many farmers are presently quite well off. Many have rebuilt their homes, or built new ones and have acquired all the appliances they can get, ie. T.V., refrigerators, etc. Quite a few even own cars (though they may not necessarily have a driver's license!). The problem of the farmers has been one of having more money than they can spend. Living in the countryside, they do not have access to many things, especially good clothing. While they can and do make trips to the cities, they do not have the same time to stand in line or just wait for certain foods to become available as the urban resident has. In the country, the stores' supplies are even more limited and more erratic than in the cities. A farmer often cannot even get the basic tools he needs to do his work. Should he need a spade and be fortunate enough to find the metal part in the local store, he might not find the wooden handle. If he then wants to make his own handle he might not find any nails in the store to attach his spade to the handle. Larger equipment may stand idle on the cooperative farms while the private farmer is unable to buy any.

Theoretically, there is no unemployment in Poland. The government is the sole employer and keeps people on the job even when there is no job left to be done. On the other hand, if someone is deemed politically unreliable, perhaps because he/she has been critical of the Soviet's policies, the government feels free to dismiss such a person, thereby depriving him of all chances to find another job. In general, moving from one job to another is not easy, but can be done. In that case the person must obtain various papers and statements from the former place of employment and present them to the new place in order to be employable. Since the employer is the same everywhere, nobody will be employed without favorable papers. The only way to make some kind of a living after a dismissal is through odd jobs for private people.

II. Modern Polish Refugees and Their Predecessors, Polonia

Polish people feel very attached to their country and ordinarily would not dream of resettling in another country. They do like to travel though, and

during recent years many of those who could afford it, took vacations abroad. Many more went to Western European countries to work as guestworkers in order to make money and better their living standard in Poland. They rarely ever consider extending their stay indefinitely, though many might stay for several years.

As the political situation worsened, many Poles who were abroad vacationing or working applied for asylum. Most of the Polish refugees who arrived in Austria before martial law was proclaimed in Poland were in possession of passports, and travelled by train or bus through Czechoslovakia to reach Austria. Some were able to pass through East Germany and entered the West through Berlin, and a small number entered Western European countries by way of Yugoslavia. Polish people need passports to leave their country, but it is easier to get a passport to Yugoslavia, a non-aligned country, than to other Western European countries.

So far, the majority of the recent Polish arrivals have been young, single people in their twenties, most of them men. A few arrived as families while some left their families behind with the hope of reuniting later. Since the fee charged for obtaining a passport amounts to about one month's salary, a family might not have been able to afford more than one passport. As in the past, the head of the household might also have left with the intention of returning after a number of years. Most of the Polish refugees come with good technical skills, having completed eight to twelve years of schooling in addition to their technical training. A smaller number of refugees are highly educated professionals.

Nearly every Pole loves his country and longs for the companionship of other compatriots. However, those who grew up under the present Polish system and those who came to the U.S. earlier, especially those who came befcre World War II, are very different people who may not act and think alike. The old established Polish communities across the United States, called Polonia, (the largest one with about 600,000 in Chicago) remember Poland as the country it was when they left, perhaps fifty years ago, a country the Polish newcomers never knew. When they came, often with little education but ready to do any kind of work in order to improve their position in life, they expected and received no help. Most of them are very conservative, have settled in their own neighborhoods, read Polish newspapers, and listen to their Polish broadcasts.

The new refugees do not share the conservative values of those who came before them. Though they may hate the Polish system, most are liberals who take many of the socialist features for granted. The mental gap between the two groups is often quite obvious. While Polonia talks about the deprivation they lived under in Poland and how they worked their way up here, the new Poles in the U.S. talk about their own problems, how to get diplomas recognized, how to study for the required licenses they may need to practice their professions, etc., problems the older and second generation of American Poles do not have. Both old and new Polish people in this coun-

try tend to be Catholic - but in church, Polonia sits with Polonia, and new Poles with new Poles.

III. First Impressions and Where They Come From

Both the non-Polish sponsor and the Polish refugee will probably have some very distinct first impressions during the first few days or weeks of the refugee's stay in America. Most immediately, the sponsor might be surprised at the outward appearance of his refugee or refugee family, who might convey to him a sense of elegance, graciousness, and formality all at once. It is not uncommon for Polish women to wear a good amount of expensive jewelry, and perhaps even a fur coat. The display of economic well-being might make some Americans hesitant to take the refugee into their home for whatever period of time without seemingly wanting to charge a weekly rent. Although the refugee was probably not truly poor when in Poland, the way he or she looks and behaves is simply the way "one" looks and behaves in Poland. Their priorities in spending money tend to be quite different from ours, and one should not conclude from the outward appearance that the Polish refugee is in fact rich and/or faces no adjustment problems.

By the same token that we compare looks or behavior of persons to our standard, so the refugees compare us and our lifestyle to what they are used to. And coming to America, usually without any idea that things could be different from Poland or Europe, they are in for a surprise. The slums, the dirt in the street, and the graffiti are overwhelming. In Poland, people get fined if they drop a paper in the street. Other European cities and towns they may have seen before confirmed their assumption that all people keep their houses and streets neat. Since the refugees generally have to take rather low-paying jobs in the beginning, most do not have the means to live in the "nice" areas. To many Poles, even our average suburb is often not as neat as the European or Polish small town, and our houses are built much more for comfort and convenient maintenance than for looks. The small windows which make many houses rather dark as well as the monotony of so many houses built in exactly the same style, appear old-fashioned to many European eyes. There is no question that an American household tends to have many more things (cars, gadgets, machines) than its Polish counterpart, but the Polish household may surpass the American one in quality and elegance. Clearly, many Polish people are not impressed with the way we live as they first see it. It will take some time for them to recognize the positive features in American society, eg. that houses may look cheap compared to those in Poland, but that, therefore, many more people are able to own one.

IV. Mental Adjustment to Life in America

Conflict between independence and control: The Polish people are very independent-minded which has resulted in Poland being the least indoctrinated East European nation, and accounts for the emergence of Solidarity and its present problems. The Polish people like to decide their own lives and work for their own goals. However, thirty years of Communist rule have not gone by without making an impression on the present generation of Poles. Even though most of the Polish refugees dislike their political system, they are a product of it and do not question many of its components. In fact, they are used to, and expect that many decisions are made for them, and that they will be taken care of by the state. When the state's control is removed upon coming to the United States, they may be unprepared to take full charge of all aspects of their lives in a free society.

This manifests itself in their expectation that a job will be waiting for them when they step off the plane, and if there is none waiting, that someone will certainly line one up within a very short span of time. They are unfamiliar with most kinds of insurance because in Poland the state took care of such needs. Receiving a medical or dental bill seems like an unbelievable imposition to them. Nobody should ever be expected to pay for such matters. Schools are another point in question. In Poland, there are only state schools where the teaching is good, and the learning serious. The quality of American schools varies tremendously, and even the best do not expect the same serious learning attitude from their student body as the Polish state schools. Should their children enter one of the more deplorable schools here, the parents' reaction may be one of intense dismay that schools can be bad at all. Polish people are not used to picking from a variety of choices. In Poland, you don't even need to make a decision of what to have for supper. In most cases, the question is resolved by what there is left in the house, or by what can be obtained at the market. The same goes for other material goods. You buy what there is, not what you want and when you want it.

In general, the most difficult adjustment the Polish refugee has to make is adjusting to the freedom in American society, which means the freedom of choice, including the freedom to make profits but also the freedom to be poor.

Discipline: To a great extent, discipline is a European tradition. For the Poles, discipline has been further developed through the political system. Laws are accepted as something that has to be obeyed, no matter what common sense or anyone else might tell you. Discipline goes into many aspects of daily life, starting with refraining from littering in the streets (because it is not allowed). A Polish person will hesitate to cross a street when the light is red, a common practice in America. In Europe this is simply not done, because a) you might get killed because cars do not

stop for pedestrians, and b) because if caught by a policeman, you will pay. But even when neither a car nor a policeman are in sight, discipline will make the European wait for the light to change, a habit which remains with the person for years. The lack of discipline in families and in the government which does not respond to what appears to the Polish newcomers as chaotic conditions, remains distressing to many Poles for a long time.

Self-Confidence: Most Poles are very self-confident. Collectively they not only love their country, but think of it as a large and historically extremely significant one. Thus, the reality of a general ignorance about Poland in America, of its relative insignificance for America and Americans, except during periods of crisis, and of bad jokes about the Polish character, comes totally unexpected to the Polish refugee, and is painful to live with.

Saving Versus Waste: First impressions already indicated the Polish preference for quality over quantity. Historically, this preference is due to the fact that Europe has not been able to afford the luxury of wasting natural resources. Things have to be made to last. Over and above the general European understanding of limited resources, years of erratic supplies have deepened the natural tendency of the Polish people toward saving. Whether it be money, water, paper, utilities, or other things, Poles are great savers. Seeing the great waste which pervades America is hard for them. On the other hand, their past deprivation of many material goods has made many of them extremely materialistic. Thus, working to acquire things can become the major purpose in life.

V. Adjustment to Daily Life

Work: The central point of starting a new life in America is a new job. Under the Polish system, work is a fundamental right as well as an obligation of each individual. For the Polish man, work is even more: it is his life, and the way to prove his manhood. Thus, to have trouble finding a job or losing one is beyond comprehension for the newly arrived Polish refugee. For a man, the lack of a job may even seriously influence his psychological health. Most Polish refugees will do anything to earn a living and get started. Since most are also skilled, finding jobs has generally not been too difficult. They are eager workers and past experience shows that the vast majority of employers are very happy with their Polish employees.

In Poland, jobs are found and people are hired through personal relationships. In America this is also true to an extent, but more so for higher level jobs than for lower ones, and even with personal connections, the applicant still needs to have the exact qualifications required for that job. In Poland, only professional positions have detailed requirements. Other jobs require only a minimum level of education, and rarely any

specific skills. If you are a decent person, intelligent, and know the person who does the hiring, you can be fairly sure to get the job. Thus, the refugee may have difficulty understanding why the sponsor may not be in a position to readily find a suitable job. You will want to tell him about the different approach in this country. The chances are that before your refugee can seriously start looking for a job he will need help with writing a resume. He may have a variety of diplomas and papers and probably expects them to be sufficient to get him a job. If he has any resume at all, it is apt to be a biography rather than an American style resume. By helping him to write a resume, you also show him how to communicate his past experience and skills to an employer during an interview.

Language: The majority of Polish refugees do not speak any English and the pronunciation of English words may be difficult for them. However, they have gone through good schooling in their country during which most studied at least one, sometimes two, foreign languages, usually Russian first, then English, German, or French. Quite a few of the older Poles speak German. The success and speed of their learning English depends greatly on their age. Some may be so eager to work and earn money that they may not pay the proper attention to studying English once they have a job. On the whole, however, the Polish refugees are highly motivated to learn the language of their new country.

Housing: In Poland, housing is very scarce and many people are used to sharing bathrooms and kitchens with other families, and to living with very little space. Some young couples have to wait many years before they have their own apartment. However, as mentioned earlier, smallness does not mean sub-standard or bad housing. Thus, some refugees may not be satisfied with a low-rent apartment. On the other hand, they have been known to use only one bedroom for a family of four while leaving the second bedroom unused.

Transportation: Most Poles did not own a car in Poland. Public transportation is good and everybody uses it to get to any destination. The refugees are amazed at America's dependence on the private car. Some will find it very difficult to be so restricted in their movement before they own a car. If your Polish refugee already knows how to drive, he might be well-advised to take a few driving lessons in this country as the driving style in Poland differs considerably from that in the States. Polish driving tends to be offensive and involves a great deal of dashing in and out. In Poland, it is the responsibility of the pedestrians to see to it that they do not get run over.

Social Life: Poles have a great need to get together with other Poles, though as indicated, there could be some conflict between oldtimers and newcomers. The refugees will yearn for information on Poland and find it upsetting that conditions in Poland are not well known in America (even during "normal" times). Especially during the early weeks when the shock of the new environment is still intense, a subscription to a Polish newspaper or weekly (the New York Nowy Dziennik, a daily and a weekly, is good), might

reduce their anxiety by providing them not only with information on their country, but also on news of the Polish communities in the States. There are also quite a few Polish radio broadcasts across the country. Find out whether there is one in your area and let your refugee know. The same goes for a Polish church. If there is one, the Polish newcomer will feel very happy worshipping with his own people, possibly in his own language.

Cultural Needs: Polish people are accustomed to attending cultural events and seeing good movies with some regularity. Tickets for either can usually be had without great difficulty or expense in their country. Most will appreciate good performances, especially concerts and operas, and will want to search out good movies in the states. They will probably prefer the public TV channel to other networks, and it will take some adjustment to watch programs interrupted by advertisements.

Formality and seriousness: Outside their close circle of family and friends, Polish people are generally formal and serious. The American friendliness displayed to strangers as well as friends will be new to them and may be misunderstood. Until they realize that this friendliness is the American way of dealing with people and thus can be superficial, they might expect a deeper commitment to go with it, as for example, the commitment (and ability) to find a job for them. To be taken into the home of a stranger may be difficult for the refugee to accept, and may instill in him a feeling of indebtedness to be repayed later in the form of presents and other considerations. On the other hand, the Polish refugee in your home will probably feel like a guest and behave like one - serious, courteous, but not offer to help with household chores. This is something that a guest is not allowed to do by any host in Poland. You may want to teach your Polish refugee (family), that helping is not only perfectly alright, but that it is actually expected.

Food: Ingredients to Polish cooking are not much different from American staples found in supermarkets. However, their cooking is different and there is no day without soup as a first dish. The American soft bread is difficult to get used to, but many supermarkets carry rye (the German, Scandinavian, or Jewish kind) bread which is, in kind, much closer to Polish bread.

The vast majority of Poles drink and smoke a great deal. Some Poles feel that tensions in the country for so many years have contributed to the smoking habit of many Poles. Drinking, on the other hand, is part of life, at least for the Polish men. Yet theirs is very different from the American drinking habit. A drink every day might sound to a Pole like the habit of an alcoholic. He drinks much less frequently, perhaps once every other week, when there is an occasion (a friend's visit, etc.); but when he drinks, he usually drinks Vodka and probably a good amount of it. A cocktail or any other "long" drink would generally not be to his taste.

Though the initial shock of the Polish refugee in the United States may be considerable, mostly because he did not expect life in America to be different from life in Poland, nearly everybody who has lived and worked with Poles, agrees that they catch on very fast. Their motivation to make money for themselves and for their families back home, to be independent and become a fully productive member of their new society is great. Very few Poles ever go on welfare, and nearly nobody stays on welfare for any length of time. And, they do get used to seeing dirty streets, slums, and poverty as much as the rest of America. What they might not give up so quickly is their discipline and hard work.